

CITIZENSHIP LAW, NRC

Fresh protests rock India after RSS rally

AFP, New Delhi

Indians took to the streets again yesterday in yet more protests against a citizenship law, a day after pro-government Hindu hardliners staged a show of force complete with horses, drums and batons.

Two weeks of at times violent demonstrations have killed at least 27 people as anti-government protesters have vented their anger nationwide in the biggest challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi since he stormed to power in 2014.

Modi denies accusations that the law, which eases naturalisation procedures for non-Muslim minorities from three nations, is part of a master plan to reshape India as a purely Hindu nation.

But coupled with plans for a national register of citizens, it has stoked fears at home and abroad, including in Washington and at the UN rights office, about the marginalisation of India's 200 million Muslims.

On Wednesday several thousand baton-wielding volunteers from a Hindu hardline group -- of which Modi is a lifelong member -- held a rally in the southern city of Hyderabad, in a show of support for the government.

Members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militaristic group that has long espoused "Hindutva" or Hindu hegemony, marched through the streets beating drums and blowing horns.

The parade, organised before the protests began, saw volunteers ride horses, sing songs, and perform group exercises using lathis -- bamboo batons deployed by Indian riot police.

The protests against the citizenship law meanwhile show no signs of going away, although in recent days numbers have been smaller.

Around 2,500 people rallied against the government in the financial capital Mumbai on Thursday, police told AFP, with demonstrators waving flags and carrying banners calling for a boycott of the citizenship law.

Protesters also took to the streets in the eastern city of Kolkata while hundreds of Muslim women demonstrated in the southern state of Karnataka where two people were shot dead by police in protests last week.

While many of the protests have been peaceful, demonstrations have sometimes turned violent with police also accused of a disproportionate response.

In India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh -- where 19 people have been killed -- the authorities have arrested thousands and sought damages from more than 100 people accused of rioting and destroying public property.

Around 130 people have been ordered to pay nearly 5 million rupees (\$70,000) within a week, with officials warning that their properties will be confiscated and auctioned to recover the amount if necessary.

Authorities were bracing for further protests today in Uttar Pradesh, home to a large Islamic minority, and in parts of New Delhi following Muslim prayers.

Mobile internet, which was cut across large parts of Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere last week, has been restored, although the cities of Agra -- home to the Taj Mahal -- and Bulandshahr remain offline.

AL may opt for a new face

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On December 22, the Election Commission announced that the DNCC and the DSCC elections would be held on January 30. December 31 is the last date for submitting nomination papers, while January 9 is the deadline for the withdrawal of candidacy. The EC will scrutinise nomination papers on January 2.

AL insiders said the party's top leaders think current DSCC Mayor Sayeed Khokon could not bring positive changes in areas under the city corporation's jurisdiction. He also could not act properly to prevent and tackle the dengue outbreak earlier this year.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, the mayor's protocol officer Habibul Islam Sumon, however, claimed AL chief Sheikh Hasina told Khokon to start election-related activities. He said Khokon met Hasina at the Gono Bhaban around 8:30pm.

The AL's top leadership, however, was not blaming incumbent DNCC Mayor Atiquel for not properly tackling the dengue situation as he was new to the post when the outbreak hit the city, said party sources.

Atiquel was elected mayor in a by-election in February.

Talking about Taposh, a top AL leader, wishing not to be named, said, "There are strong possibilities that the party high-ups would nominate him as the DSCC mayor candidate."

According to AL insides, Taposh bought nomination form with the consent of party chief and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

They said Taposh may get the party ticket for the mayor polls and if he contests the election, he will have to resign as Dhaka-10 MP.

If Taposh steps down, his brother Prof Sheikh Fazle Shams Parash, the newly-elected Juba League chairman, would seek AL nomination to become lawmaker from the constituency, the sources said.

Taposh and Parash are two sons of Juba League's founding chairman Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni. Moni and his pregnant wife Arzoo Moni were assassinated along with the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family members on August 15, 1975.

Amid speculations over who would get the AL nomination for the DSCC mayor polls, Khokon yesterday collected his nomination form from

the party chief's Dhanmondi office in the capital.

While talking to reporters outside the office, Khokon, son of late AL leader and former mayor of Dhaka City Corporation Mohammad Hanif, broke down in tears and said "I joined politics holding the hand of my father. In his absence, Sheikh Hasina is my guardian. She will do whatever she thinks is better."

Taposh and Haji Mohammad Selim, MP from Dhaka-7, bought nomination forms for the DSCC mayor election on Wednesday, the first day of the sale of the forms.

Atiquel Islam bought his the same day.

AL Office Secretary Biplob Barua said 17 leaders collected nomination forms for contesting polls for the mayoral posts in the two city corporations. The number of ward councillor aspirants was 700 till yesterday.

Party insiders said Nanak has expressed his desire to run for the DNCC mayor. A former lawmaker from Dhaka-13, Nanak was not given party ticket from the parliamentary seat in the last general election on December 30 last year.

"Nanak's desire has created a dilemma for the party about its mayor candidate," an AL leader said.

Nanak, however, was yet to collect his nomination form.

The party would conclude the sale of nomination forms today and finalise its candidates tomorrow.

Al-backed Sayeed Khokon and Annisul Huq won the previous mayoral polls to the DSCC and DNCC, held on April 28, 2015.

The party nominated businessperson Atiquel Islam for a mayoral by-polls held in February this year after the post fell vacant with the death of Annisul Huq on November 30, 2017.

Except the ones in Sylhet and Cumilla, the ruling party candidates won all the mayoral elections in 10 city corporations out of the 12.

The party conducted several surveys on its possible candidates and the survey reports were with Hasina, according to the party's General Secretary Obaidul Quader.

Candidates with acceptance among party's rank and file would get nominations, he said yesterday while talking to reporters in Narayanganj.

Quader, also minister for Road Transport and Bridges, said the party would not nominate anyone controversial.



Sayeed Khokon, left, after he bought DSCC mayor polls nomination form yesterday.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



Wrapped up in plastic sacks and whatever else they could find, day labourers sleep on a pavement in the capital's Karwan Bazar last night. The cold wave has hit hard the poor, especially the homeless, across the country.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

9 ministers dropped from AL committee

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MINISTERS LEFT OUT

Seven ministers of the Hasina-led 47-member cabinet have been dropped from the central executive committee. They are Housing and Public Works Minister SM Rezaul Karim, former legal affairs secretary of AL; Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi, former finance secretary; State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, Deputy Minister for Water Resources AKM Enamul Haque Shamim and Deputy Minister for Education Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury -- former organising secretary; State Minister for Religious Affairs Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, former religious affairs secretary; and State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Fazilatun Nessa Indira, former women affairs secretary.

Besides, Industries Minister Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun and State Minister for Labour and Employment Begum Monnujan Sufian, both executive members of the previous AL central working committee (ALCWC), were also left out of the new committee. Road Transport and Bridges Minister Quader, Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque, Education Minister Dipu Moni and Information Minister Hasan Mahmud were elected to the new AL central committee during the party council.

Apart from the ministers, Rajshahi city Mayor AHM Khairuzzaman Liton and the Gazipur Zilla Parishad chairman, both members of the previous ALCWC, were not included in the new committee.

Speaking to The Daily Star on condition of anonymity, a central AL leader yesterday said party high-ups had long been hoping to separate the organisation from the government to make the party stronger.

"Some efforts have already been made in this regard. Further actions would be visible as the cabinet is likely

to be reshuffled in the first week of next month," he said.

Among the leaders declared elected yesterday, 13 secured posts in the party's highest decision-making committee for the first time.

They are Shafiu Alam Chowdhury from Sylhet (organising secretary), reserved seat MP Waseqa Ayesha Khan (finance secretary), Saem Khan (deputy office secretary); and Mostofa Jalal Mohiuddin, AKM Jahangir, Akter Jahan, Dr Musique, Hosney Ara Lutfu Dalia, Safura Khatun, Sanjida Khanam, Anisur Rahman, Shahabuddin Farazi and Gloria Jharna Sarkar (members).

Afzal Hossain, information and research secretary of the immediate past ALCWC, was promoted to organising secretary while Habibur Rahman Siraj and Aminul Islam Amin were retained in their posts of labour and manpower affairs secretary and deputy publicity affairs secretary for a second straight term.

BNP to bank on young

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about the voting atmosphere and allege that free and fair election is not possible under the Awami League government.

The party has been participating in different elections as part of its strategy to expose how far the situation is from what can be called free and fair, BNP leaders said.

The BNP also wants to prove that the electronic voting machines (EVM) are "faulty".

The party has already given the go-ahead to Tabith Awal to run for Dhaka north and Ishraq Hossain for Dhaka south city corporations.

Top leaders said the candidates are young, well-educated, energetic, and have clean image that would attract young voters.

"We are focusing on the candidates who are acceptable to all and loyal to the party," BNP standing committee member Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury told The Daily Star yesterday.

Tabith and Ishraq will be officially endorsed soon, a senior leader said.

"The party has been talking about changes in leadership for a long time. These two nominations will be the beginning of it," he said.

The BNP started selling nomination forms yesterday and will continue until this evening. It would make the official endorsement after interviewing the hopefuls tomorrow.

Tabith and Ishraq collected the forms from the party's Nayapaltan headquarters yesterday.

"The party has decided to participate in the election as part of our greater struggle of restoring democracy in the country and to release BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia from jail. If the party nominates me, I will try to reach out to the people and send our message to them," said Ishraq,

who has a post-graduate degree from University of Hertfordshire.

Son of former mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka, Ishraq was born in 1987. If nominated, this would be his first time running for mayor.

On the other hand, Tabith, son of BNP leader Abdul Awal Mintoo, ran for mayor the last time but the BNP boycotted the election halfway through the polling day, making allegations of widespread vote rigging and ballot stuffing. Born in 1979, he has a post graduate degree from George Washington University.

"There are two reasons [for me to run]. The moral cause for participating in the election is to make the city liveable. And secondly, from a political perspective, it is an opportunity to unite the people of the city for the greater cause of ensuring people's rights and restoring democracy," Tabith said.

After it boycotted the January 5, 2014 general election, the BNP participated in Dhaka city polls in 2015.

The BNP joined the general election in December last year but rejected the results, alleging vote rigging. The party shunned the by-election at Dhaka North City Corporation in March this year.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir has already expressed doubts over fair polls, saying free and fair election was not possible under this government.

Fakhrul also alleged that the use of EVMs would not help reflect the mandate of the electorate.

With the Awami League in power, it is impossible for the current election commission to hold a free and fair election, he said. "Despite this, we are contesting in the elections because we believe in democracy."

American academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who has been detained in Iran since November 2018, has been granted bail by a court in the city of Isfahan.

Moore-Gilbert, who was arrested in October 2018, was accused of "espionage" and "spying for another country".

Her lawyer, Mohammad Reza, said she had been held in solitary confinement and denied access to her family and legal counsel.

Moore-Gilbert, who is a citizen of the United States, was arrested at the airport in Tehran while en route to the US.

Her lawyer said she had been held in solitary confinement and denied access to her family and legal counsel.

Foolish to publish

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The minister was addressing a discussion at an auditorium in the town as he inaugurated Mukti joddha Complexes in 11 upazilas of Naogaon.

"The list taken from the home ministry won't be published again. After an intense investigation, the upazila-based list of Razakars will be published. We have made a mistake. We have also retracted [the list]. There will be no mistake this time," said the minister.

The government on December 15 published what it said was a list of 10,789 Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams and anti-liberation individuals who collaborated with the Pakistani army in 1971.

The list caused widespread outrage as it contained the names of many freedom fighters.

Amid angry protests, the Liberation War ministry on December 18 retracted the list.

The minister yesterday announced that a list of freedom fighters will be published in January next year.

Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder also spoke at the event.

The names of the information providers would be kept secret for the sake of the investigation, the press release added.

In another development, a Supreme Court lawyer yesterday sent a legal notice to the government and the DU authorities, requesting them to provide adequate security for Ducusu Vice President Nur in seven days.

Advocate Md Moniruzzaman served the legal notice to the home secretary, DU vice chancellor and proctor.

Mexico calls meeting to protest Bolivian harassment

REUTERS, Mexico City

Mexico's Foreign Ministry on Wednesday requested a meeting with Bolivia's charge d'affaires to protest the "harassment and intimidation" of its diplomatic personnel in the Bolivian city La Paz.

Since Monday, Mexico has accused Bolivia of ramping up police presence outside its embassy and intimidating diplomats.

The spat follows a chill in relations after Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador last month gave political asylum to former Bolivian president Evo Morales, a fellow leftist.

Mexico's Foreign Ministry said it called a meeting for yesterday so that the Bolivian charge d'affaires can "explain the behavior of Bolivian authorities," the ministry said in a statement.



Tabith Awal, left, collects the BNP's nomination form at the party's Nayapaltan headquarters to run for DNCC mayor.

PHOTO: COLLECTED